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ABSTRACT

This brief document summarizes the content of a paper by Sharon L. Kagan, entitled "Excellence in Early Childhood Education: Defining Characteristics and Next-Decade Strategies," that analyzes the field of early childhood education and defines excellence in terms of quality, equality, and integrity. The critical component of quality is discussed in terms of research findings and difficulties in maintaining high quality programs. The neglected component of equality involves several kinds of inequality in communities and states. These include segregation by income, race, and stringency of regulation. Such segregation results from the absence of federal standards. The unconsidered component of integrity involves the linking of disparate parts in a field that is characterized by acrimony and competition among providers. Concluding material describes three strategies that offer hope that the field can develop from well-intentioned, piecemeal programs to comprehensive services. These strategies involve moving from a program approach to a systems approach, from a piecemeal vision to an integrated vision, and from short-term or quick-fix strategies to long-term thinking that confirms commitment to young children by matching rhetoric with financial support. (RH)

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Executive Summary

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Rethinking Excellence in Early Care and Education

Child care and early education, no longer services for the isolated few, are becoming the daily reality for millions of American youngsters. As these services increase, America finds itself at the brink of major decisions regarding the very purpose and structure of its commitment to young children. Burgeoning demands for quality services have been accompanied by the realization that inequity, fragmentation, and discontinuity—all of which have characterized the field for decades—dilute the delivery of efficient and effective early care and education.

In a paper commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), *Excellence in Early Childhood Education: Defining Characteristics and Next-Decade Strategies*, author Sharon L. Kagan of Yale University analyzes the changing field. She offers a redefinition of excellence, suggesting that it embrace quality, equality and integrity.

Barely 50 years ago, day care and early education were seen as distinctly different and non-essential programs. Day care was primarily a social service for indigent or working parents, while early childhood programs were established to meet the social and learning needs of children. In later years, children of middle- and upper-income families attended part-day nursery schools, while children of low-income families were enrolled in Federal or State subsidized programs like Head Start. Although no longer seen as dissimilar in purpose or importance to each other, or to education in general, day care and early education remain badly fragmented. Initiated with different purposes and values, each has unique guidelines and regulations. To this day, early care and education services are often dubbed a "frayed patchwork quilt."

Responding to the increasing numbers of working mothers with young children and to research attesting to the efficacy of early intervention, programs mushroomed in the late 1980s. However, heated debate about issues of practice and policy soon followed. How should services be delivered? By whom? To what ends? What is the mission of early care and education? In short, how is excellence in the field defined?

Defining Excellence: The First Step

It is an odd paradox that, though much energy has been expended on defining and implementing excellence in education, excellence has had comparatively little emphasis in early care and education. Rather, an equivalent term, "quality," has been widely researched.

Quality: The Critical Component

Correlates of quality have been categorized into findings associated with environment and teaching; with children's behaviors; and with the interaction of environment and children's behaviors. Rich data affirm the importance of the physical properties of the setting, child/caregiver (or teacher) ratios, group size, stability of caregivers, curriculum, and the involvement of parents. Small groups with well-trained staff who value parent input and support are critical ingredients of quality in early care and education. At the same time, findings repeatedly underscore the importance of play, self-initiated activities, and discovery to quality learning.

Despite these findings, teachers report that maintaining high quality programs is difficult for several reasons. Parents, anxious about their children's success, exert pressure for overly structured classrooms and instructional practices that often are counter to the research findings. The national drive for accountability, while necessary, creates further pressures. To meet requisite scores, teachers teach to the test despite analyses documenting the inappropriateness of testing and the resultant misuse of tests for young children.

Equality: The Neglected Component

But quality alone will not ensure excellence in early care and education. A second component, equality, must be added to the equation. Unlike elementary and secondary education where a commitment to integration prevails, early care

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and education policy sanctions the economic segregation of children, according to Kagan. Low-income children are enrolled in subsidized programs while upper-income children are enrolled in fee-for-service programs. Such practice endorses segregation overtly by income and covertly by race, thereby sustaining inequality.

The field of early care and education also is plagued by other kinds of inequality. Some programs are required to meet stringent health and safety regulations and guidelines while others, notably those in schools and churches, are exempt. Such inequality exists not only within communities, but among communities and States. Since no Federal standards exist, States and municipalities adopt widely divergent standards, leaving a residue of inconsistent safeguards.

Integrity: The Unconsidered Component

While the early care and education field has attempted to live up to one definition of integrity—adhering to moral and ethical principles— it has not addressed the other definition—linking disparate parts. The field remains disjointed, often characterized by acrimony and competition among providers. Few mechanisms exist to bind programs in efforts that would reduce inefficiency (such as joint planning, siting of programs, or a common data base); reduce costs (for example, joint purchasing of goods and material); or increase ideological and pedagogical continuity for children (such as common training, curriculum development, and cross-program visitations). Although it might seem that the prospect of new dollars coming into the field would ease tension, it has only intensified the historic acrimony and pitted program against program, virtually eliminating cohesive planning for future expansion.

Despite such a long history of acrimony, theoretical and practical shifts are taking root. New commitments to serving the whole child in the context of family and community speak to the need for integrating services and policies. How to reconcile arcane thinking and policy structures with current needs is the challenge.

Strategizing for Excellence

Three linked strategies offer hope that the field can move from well-intentioned, piecemeal programs to comprehensive services.

First, given that the field already understands how to implement high quality programs, new efforts should focus on models that help integrate them into permanent systems. Moving from a *program* to a *systems* approach takes what the field already knows and institutionalizes it more widely and permanently.

Second, instead of concentrating on individual programs, policymakers and educators must envision the system as a whole, recognizing that changes in one part affect others. Rapid expansion of school-based preschool programs will dramatically affect Head Start and private providers. Consequently, there must be a move from a *piecemeal* to an *integrated* vision of the field. Mechanisms to ensure effective planning and cooperation across agencies and programs must be supported.

Third, instead of thinking short-term, early care and education must be seen as a long-term investment, an integral part of a Nation's repertoire of essential services. Devising *short-term* or quick-fix strategies will not achieve excellence. *Long-haul* thinking necessitates a consideration of incentives for building a competent and sufficient work force and addressing long-neglected facilities and transportation needs. Kagan concludes that moving from short- to long-haul thinking means that America confirm its commitment to young children by matching rhetoric with financial support.

Kierkegaard said, "We live our lives forward, but understand them backward." Next-decade strategies demand that the Nation build upon past footings, recognizing that the time has come to recommit its efforts to excellence on behalf of its youngest citizens. Such forward action demands nothing less than building a system where quality, equality, and integrity for all children thrive.

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For information about ordering a copy of the full report, *Excellence in Early Childhood Education: Defining Characteristics and Next-Decade Strategies* (Publication Number IS 90–986), contact OERI, Education Information Branch, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208-5641.

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